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INTERNATIONAL COLUMN

**LET'S PLEAD FOR JUSTICE AND
PRAY FOR HEALING**

BY IRENE CHIU

Almost two years have passed since the May 1998 riots that were believed to be connected with the most horrific affront to humanity, women in

particular: the sadistic and systematic gang rapes against ethnic Chinese women in Indonesia.¹ All of a sudden, civilization had slipped back to barbarism.

According to the non-governmental organization *Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes*, approximately 1,200 were killed in Indonesia during the 1998 riot.² Women's non-governmental organizations in Indonesia also report that at least 168 women, the majority of whom are believed to be ethnic-Chinese Indonesians, were raped during this time.³ In addition, many ethnic Chinese homes and businesses in Indonesia were targeted by mobs. All these events led to the resignation of President Suharto.

Due to economic chaos and political turbulence, Chinese Indonesian women and girls were made to pay the price for adversities wholly unconnected to their doing -- shamed and debased, physically and sexually assaulted, even burned alive in the flames of fire.⁴

¹ *The Truth of The Organised-Killings and Gang-rapes Against Indonesian-Chinese* (visited March 30, 2000) <http://www.chinadawn.org/indonesia/ic_22_reports.html>

² Rev. I Sandyawan, S.J. (Secretary of Team of Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes), *Condition of Our Shared Life: The May 1998 Tragedy in Indonesia* (last modified Aug. 25, 1998) http://www.democracy.org.hk/pastweek/aug23_29/indo_fact.htm.

³ Rev. I Sandyawan, S.J. (Secretary of Team of Volunteers for Humanitarian Causes), *Condition of Our Shared Life: The May 1998 Tragedy in Indonesia* (last modified Aug. 25, 1998) http://www.democracy.org.hk/pastweek/aug23_29/indo_fact.htm

⁴ Some girls who have been gang-raped were merely ten years old. They were mostly raped in front of their parents, and some were then slaughtered right after the rape. *Indonesia's Growing List of Woes*, International Herald Tribune (London), July 24, 1998, at A1.

Indonesian government had confirmed that rapes had occurred but had never released the number. Other governments also ignored this mass murder and rape due to varied political reasons. Yet, many people have not forgotten about this indescribable tragedy.

Unfortunately, with the international spotlight mostly focused on Indonesian President Habibie's political future and IMF financial package to reform Indonesia's devastated economy⁵, little attention was paid to the Chinese Indonesian women and girls who have been victimized by their fellow countrymen.

Besides political and financial reasons⁶, the prevailing racism and sexism in Indonesia had also contributed to this disaster. Until today, there are still two-digit discriminatory laws and regulations against Chinese Indonesians

⁵ When Thailand announced the devaluation of the baht in July 1997, it caused the Indonesian rupiah to drop by as much as 80 percent at one point. Many companies, adversely affected by the currency devaluation, went bankrupt, while foreign investors fled. Indonesia's banks were hit especially hard, just like other Asian countries. Sixteen banks had suspended their operations as of January 1998. Riots began to erupt over rising food prices, gradually intensifying despite violent police efforts to put them down. In less than one year, Indonesia has shifted from being a promising economic tiger to a country staggering on the edge of economic and social turmoil.

⁶ Although the Chinese community in Indonesia accounts for only 4% of the population, it is economically powerful and is said to dominate 70% of the country's economy, operating everything from small shops to major banks and industries. Thus, native Indonesians believed that the Chinese-Indonesians took away their financial enjoyment, see *Chinese-Indonesians to celebrate New Year after 30 years*, Muzi News, Jan. 19, 2000. <<http://dailynews.muzi.com/cgi/lateline/news.cgi?p=56364&l=english>>

imposed by the Indonesian government. For example, Chinese language and characters, Chinese names, Chinese religion and temples are all banned in Indonesia.⁷ In addition, Indonesian women possess very low social status in the country.⁸ Although some lawyers and human rights activists have publicly criticized these discriminatory acts, few actions have been taken to repeal those unfair decrees. Fear for retaliation is one of the major reasons for the slow progress to amend these prejudicial problems. We saw an example when an Indonesia rape-counselor for the mass rape was murdered at home. The officials attributed her death to burglary while nothing was robbed from her residence.⁹ The Indonesian Women's Association for Justice deemed this catastrophe as a form of terror against women activists.

Although there is nothing we can do about the past, we can definitely change the future. Due to public and international pressures, current Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid had finally revoked a 1967 regulation made by the then President Suharto that banned all Chinese festivities. On February 5, 2000, it was the first time in thirty years that Chinese Indonesian may celebrate the Chinese New Year.¹⁰ Despite that this may seem trivial for some people, it is the beginning

of a progress to more equality for women and minorities in Indonesia in this new millennium. In the meantime, let us plead for justice in Indonesia and pray for healing for the victims and their families.

⁷ Ester Jusuf, *Discriminative Laws Still Abound*, Jakarta Post (March 25, 2000) <http://www.huaren.org/diaspora/asia/indonesia/news/032500-01.html>

⁸ FROM WOMEN TO THE WORLD, FEW VOICES FROM INDONESIA (Widjajanti M. Santoso, Ketty Kadarwati, & Djaka Soehendera eds., Limpad Foundation, 1995).

⁹ Thomas Wagner, *Indonesia Rape Counselor Found Dead*, Washington Post, October 10, 1998 at D1.

¹⁰ Muzi News, *supra* note 6.